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CIA Probing for AF Leaks to Israel

The Central Intelligence Agency is probing the possibility that the joint development of cruise missiles by Israel, South Africa and Taiwan was aided by high-level leaks of U.S. technology to Israel.

Chief target of the CIA probe is the Air Force. Some of its officials are suspected of opposing the official U.S. policy of refusing the Israelis our long-range nuclear delivery knowhow — and of taking illegal steps to circumvent this policy.

As I reported in an earlier column, the three nations have pooled their resources to develop nuclear weapons; they can now produce cruise missiles that can thwart enemy radar and deliver the atomic warheads up to 1,500 miles away.

Now that it's known that Israel has been sharing its nuclear technology with other nations, the CIA may be given authorization to pursue its investigation of the suspected leaks to Israel. "We don't so much mind Israel having the stuff," an intelligence official told my associate Ron McRae, "but we sure wish they'd be less free in passing it around."

One basic problem is that U.S. intelligence agencies don't agree on the question of sharing knowledge with Israel, which is not only the single truly democratic country in the Middle East, but has powerful political clout in the United States. While the Air Force has a long history of close ties with the Israelis, the CIA has argued

that Israeli intelligence activities in the United States should be curtailed.

What particularly worries the CIA is the possibility that the KGB routinely includes its agents among Soviet Jews who are permitted to emigrate to Israel. Thus, the CIA fears, any technology given to Israel may wind up in the Kremlin.

No exchange of strategically useful technology or material has been authorized by the White House, and the Pentagon has refused to supply Israel with specific nuclear weapons like the Pershing missile. But the United States has given the Israelis certain technology that could have been adapted to cruise missile development, and has studiously ignored the Israelis' conversion of American conventional weapons to nuclear capability.

The intelligence community's split over Israel may undergo a change when Ronald Reagan takes office next month. Joseph Churba, former deputy director of Air Force intelligence and now an adviser to Reagan, is an unabashed Israeli partisan. He once lost his security clearance after publicly attacking critics of Israel in the national security community.